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Hendriks, Collaboration and competition

## **Collaboration and competition: market queens, trade unions and collective action of informal workers in Ghana's Makola Market<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper focuses on informal workers in Makola Market, Accra (Ghana), and the ways in which they organize for collective action. Ghana has a long history of trade and this makes for well-developed and culturally embedded local institutions that have organized and represented the (informal) workers active in markets. A prominent example is the market queens, who (cl)aim to oversee, protect and promote markets vis-a-vis the public and the (municipal) government. Yet, these social structures are not easily recognized as a kind of social movement by (inter)national trade unions. Hence trade union interventions and outreaches aimed at ameliorating the plight of informal workers tend to bypass and antagonize these existing formations, fuelling competition and division in the already fragmented and inherently competitive market space. Based on 2.5 year-long ethnographic research on strategic actors in inclusive development with a focus on informal workers, this article draws attention to empirical realities in Ghana. It demonstrates that bypassing culturally embedded groups is problematic because it feeds fragmentation and thus limits the possibilities for collective action.*

**Keywords:** informal workers, collective action, market queens, trade unions, Ghana, social movements, Makola market, ethnography

### **Introduction**

*I am in Accra, Ghana's bustling and bubbling capital city. It is very hot and I am sweating because I am trying to make my way through the crowds to reach the centre of 31<sup>st</sup> December Market in Makola, one of Ghana's oldest and biggest markets. Chaos and capitalism celebrate a happy marriage here, I remember thinking while I move through the narrow alleys, trying not to bump into other people and the neatly piled up goods. I am on my way to an interview with Makola's market queen and I don't want to be late. The queen holds office outside of a primary school that was built inside the market for the traders' children to attend. When I arrive she is sitting on the veranda in a sparkly white dress, and she gestures to me that I should join her in the shade. I am really missing my research assistant, with whom I normally visit the market, but she*

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank the two anonymous peer reviewers for their valuable comments to an earlier version of this paper.

*is delayed as her trotro (minibus) broke down. Yet I do not want to cancel the interview, because it has taken me almost six weeks to get it organized: the queen was busy, it was election time, and – as she reveals during the interview – she was hesitant to speak to me. Makola being the biggest market in Accra, many obruni (whites) visit and many (international) organisations (aim to) become active in the market. Not all of these recognize ‘procedure’ and ‘custom’, the queen tells me, which means that some of them evade or undermine her authority – much to her dismay. When I bring up the Ghana Trade Union Congress (GTUC) and its attempts at organizing informal workers in the market, the queen quickly responds: ‘Without doing on the grassroot, you can’t work at the top. Nobody can jump from outside’.*

This interview took place in October 2016 when I was doing fieldwork in Accra for a research project that focuses on increasing political leverage for informal workers and the organisations that (cl)aim to represent them.<sup>2</sup> In the project, trade unions and informal workers’ organisations are conceptualized as ‘strategic actors’ for inclusive development that can assist informal workers to promote and obtain decent work conditions as described by the International Labour Organisation (ILO).<sup>3</sup> The informal economy is very diverse, but informal workers have one thing in common: many of them labour under precarious conditions and have no, or limited, access to social security (Chen 2012, Lindell 2010a). In Ghana, informal workers make up more than 85% of the workforce and the economic developments of the past decades – not least the Structural Adjustment Programs enforced by the IMF and World Bank – seem to have only increased their numbers (Boampong in Lindell 2010a, GTUC 2009). Or, as the market queen put it: ‘when the formal market stopped employing, we employ. When government deploys, we employ’.

A large number of informal workers are women and this is especially visible in market places in Ghana, where women traders have traditionally dominated the scene (Britwum 2013, Clark 1994, 1997, 2010, Greenstreet 1972). The earliest travel accounts of the West African region describe female traders and the importance of (inter)regional trade networks – including the role of the market queens (Clark 2010, Awuah 1997). Market queens are female traders who rule a market and represent its traders to the outside world, even though they do not occupy a formally recognized administrative position (Thiel 2015, 60). In contemporary Ghanaian society, market queens still have great moral authority, both inside and outside of markets (Britwum 2013, Clark 1997, 2010). They are part of powerful social networks that connect them to all layers of society and they are able to mobilize large numbers of market traders for issues of shared concern. Yet, these market queens are not often recognized as leaders of social

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<sup>2</sup> This project is part of the research agenda of the Knowledge Platform on Inclusive Development Policies and funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs through NWO-WOTRO. <http://includeplatform.net/research-group/increasing-political-leverage-for-informal-and-formal-workers-organizations-for-inclusive-development/> (last accessed 24-04-2017)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.ilo.org/global/topics/decent-work/lang--en/index.htm> (last accessed 24-04-2017)

movements, by other social movements. This is evident from the remarks of Makola's market queen in the excerpt above: she accuses the trade union, that has stepped up to organize market traders, of 'jumping' in from 'outside' while she is already there. Both the queens and the labour movement ultimately aspire to the same goal: collective action by informal workers to safeguard their interests. So why do these two groups appear to be competing, instead of collaborating?

As was highlighted in the call for papers for this special issue on 'social movement thinking beyond "the core"', social movement studies have tended to focus on the Global North; Europe and North America. Creating space for new ways of looking at and seeing social movements (in the Global South) is therefore urgently needed (Sutcliffe 2012). This article aims to contribute to this by presenting an empirical case, situated in Ghana, elucidating the intricacies of collaboration and competition for social movements – in the broadest sense of the term – on the ground. In what follows I first situate this paper in relevant theoretical discussions on the informal sector, trade unions, informal workers' organisations and collective action. Thereafter I delve deeper into Makola market, the market queens and the labour movements' activities in it, zooming in on their competition and potential for collaboration. This paper aims to show that although locally developed forms of organizing, like the market queens, do not necessarily correspond to pre-conceived notions of what social movements (should) look like, bypassing them is problematic because it feeds fragmentation, hence impacting negatively on the possibilities for collective action.

### **Informality, workers' organisations and collective action**

In the early 1970s anthropologist Keith Hart coined the term 'informal economy' when he studied income opportunities in urban Ghana (Hart 1973). His aim was to illustrate the diverse range of activities that people who are not formally employed engage in while attempting to take care of themselves and their families. The term became widely used by a multitude of actors – governments, not in the least – who tended to focus on the fact that workers and companies active in the informal sector are not paying tax and potentially engage in illegal activities (Hart 2009, Lindell 2010a). Consequently more often than not, informal workers have to deal with a 'bad image' and actively need to claim their right to work and live in the city (Magure 2015, Jimu in Lindell 2010a). The informal economy is extremely diverse and the boundary between the formal and the informal is not as clear as the terms suggest: in praxis, many workers engage in activities in both sectors (Lindell 2010a). This makes it difficult to define the archetypal informal worker and the challenges s/he faces (Chen 2012). Broadly speaking however, informal workers engage in 'economic activities that lie beyond or circumvent state regulation' (Lindell 2010a, 5). This holds true for many of the workers we find in Makola market. Some of them are barely managing to get by, selling one piece of cloth every few days. Others rent several big stores and casually employ other traders to work for them. In this

sense, the informal economy shows us the resourcefulness of people who manage to create their own income under precarious conditions (Sindzingre 2006).

Over time, many different schools of thought have emerged that attempt to interpret the (existence of the) informal economy. In the early 1960s most thinkers assumed that it was a temporary phenomenon, linked to developing economies, and that the formal economy would eventually absorb the informal one (Lindell 2010a, Munck 2010, 2013, Sindzingre 2006). The ILO (1972) classified venturing into the informal economy as a 'survival strategy' and urged more formal job creation. As time progressed, scholars increasingly came to see the informal economy as part and parcel of the capitalist economic system (Castells and Portes 1989), or as an entrepreneurial strategy to avoid the cumbersome bureaucratic procedures that are present in the formal economy (De Soto 1989). The notion that many activities in the informal economy would not be allowed or possible in the formal economy, led to the assumption, noted above, that informal economic activities are illegal and dangerous. This link between informality and illegality is regularly used by politicians aiming to prosecute those who (attempt to) circumvent their regulations – rather than offering a useful description (Brown and Lyons in Lindell 2010a, Mitullah in Lindell 2010a, Lindell and Utas 2012, 410).<sup>4</sup>

In Ghana, more than 85% of the workforce, roughly 11 million people, is active in the informal economy (GTUC 2009).<sup>5</sup> Taking into account the current state of the world economy, this number is not expected to drop any time soon. The informal economy is here to stay (Magure 2015, Munck 2013). Yet this does not mean that the majority of informal workers do not wish to become active in the formal economy: most of the workers I spoke to argued that they would if they could, but that there are no formal jobs available to them. The discussion on whether and how to formalize the informal economy is thus a complex and vibrant one, in which informal workers' representatives mainly argue that 'it is important to ensure that formalization offers the benefits and protections that come with being formal and does not simply impose the costs of becoming formal' (Chen 2012, 14). Moreover, because of the diversity of the informal economy, formalization – if attempted – should be 'comprehensive in approach but context-specific in design and practice' (Chen 2012, 14). This is easier said than done. Attempts by the Ghanaian government to transform the informal sector into a sector for 'gainful employment', have so far not been very successful. In addition to the profound structural problem of unemployment due to Ghana's rapid population growth, many informal workers do not possess marketable skills or educational attainments that would render them suitable for formal jobs. In addition, gaining access to credit in order to start a business remains problematic (Debrah 2007).

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<sup>4</sup> McFarlane argues that these kind of (political) interventions often marginalize the already marginalized even further (2012).

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.uniwa.org/?page\\_id=24](http://www.uniwa.org/?page_id=24) (last accessed 27-04-2017)

More recently, the informal sector is increasingly considered as a vibrant and productive part of the economy (cf. Lindell 2010a, Sindzingre 2006). In the case of market women, for example, it is clear that their activities create jobs and provide income not just for the informal workers themselves but also for the Ghanaian government; they pay levies and rent for their market stalls (Awuah 1997, Baah-Ennumh and Adom-Asamoah 2012). Scholars also found that market women who deal in foodstuffs play a vital role in ensuring food security (Baah-Ennumh and Adom-Asamoah 2012, Britwum 2013).

Also, Lindell (2010a) reminds us that ‘the fact that informal activities lie outside the state regulatory system does not mean that they are “unregulated”’. The wish to formalize the informal in order to regulate the unregulated is thus to a certain extent misplaced: informal workers have devised ways in which they regulate themselves, their businesses and their colleagues (Britwum 2013, Clark 1997, see also publications by WIEGO). But despite increased recognition of their contribution to society, making their voices heard, defending their rights and gaining access to social security, remain major obstacles to achieving decent work conditions (Lindell and Ampaire 2016, Lindell 2010c). This is where workers’ organisations come in.

### **Workers’ organisations**

The most well-known workers’ organisations are probably trade unions. Trade unions emerged to safeguard workers’ rights and protect them against the actions and interests of capital and corporations. This places them squarely in the formal economy, where they work with easily recognizable groups of workers who can be classified according to their position, contract or company and who are entitled to enjoy social security, such as pensions, and protection by law (Lindell 2009, 2010a, Rizzo 2013).<sup>6</sup> By uniting workers and speaking with one voice, trade unions have been able to instigate collective actions, such as strikes and demonstrations, defending the rights of large groups of workers. In Ghana, trade unions also figured prominently during the struggle for independence, fiercely backing Kwame Nkrumah, who became the country’s first prime minister in 1957 and later (in 1960) its first president (Britwum 2013, Drah 2014, Fallon 2003).

Out of the two trade union centres currently present in Ghana, the Ghana Trade Union Congress (GTUC) is the biggest: it has 500,000 members and is active in many of Ghana’s geographical regions (Tsikata 2009).<sup>7</sup> Yet, even if GTUC would represent *all* formal workers in Ghana, this would still only translate to 15% (or even less) of the currently active labour force. Clearly, what several

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<sup>6</sup> The fact that formal workers are legally entitled to enjoy social security, does however not mean that all of them actually do so in practice. In fact, the position of formal workers appears to (have) become increasingly precarious (see Standing on the emergence of ‘the precariat’ (2012, 2014)).

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.ghanatuc.org/about.html> (last accessed 15-08-2017)

union officials referred to as ‘the shrinking of the formal economy’ has severely impacted on trade unions, the power they wield and the activities that they are able to engage in. Trade unions typically function based on the membership fees that they are able to collect. The decline of the formal economy has therefore meant that GTUC ‘lost’ members to the informal economy – and therefore also a considerable part of its income. GTUC officials conveyed that the informal economy thus represents a giant pool of new resources: discontent is omnipresent, not in the least because workers often labour under precarious conditions. On a more ideological level, the dedication to the goal of achieving decent work for all, championing the rights of all workers, makes venturing into organizing the informal economy workforce a necessity (Adu-Amankwah 1999, GTUC 2009).

Despite the widely acknowledged fact that informal economy workers could benefit from union-like organisations, fierce disagreements exist on the possibilities for trade union organizing in the informal sector. The immensely diverse work force, as mentioned above, and the fact that there are no clearly defined employer-employee relations, severely complicate trade unions’ attempts to orchestrate collective action (Lindell 2010a, Rizzo 2013). In addition, trade unions’ keenness to get involved in the informal economy appears to be very much connected to the idea that informal workers are either not yet organized, or not organized ‘properly’ (Munck 2013, Jimu in Lindell 2010a). Informal workers’ associations are often not taken into account because they usually do not organize beyond (immediate) welfare matters: they do not politicize the structural position that their members occupy in the grand economic scheme of things. Or, as one union official put it, ‘informal workers are not politically aware enough’, ‘even though the system evolves, their lives are not changing’. Because of this assumption, informal workers’ associations are not always recognized as (potential partner) organisations or movements. In fact, it seems that in order to be recognized, one has to be organized ‘properly’. The latter is then interpreted to mean democratic togetherness with internal elections, political neutrality and regular meetings (Pommerolle 2010). In Ghana, many locally emerged informal workers’ associations do not meet these criteria. This focus on a particular type of organizing thus sidesteps many existing organisational structures in the process (Pommerolle 2010, Prag in Lindell 2010a).

Despite these ‘hurdles’, many trade unions around the world have started to organize in the informal economy – a development which is, to a large extent, also donor-driven (Lindell 2009, 2010a, b, c). In Ghana, GTUC made some first attempts in the 1960s, but these were unsuccessful:

“A woman organizer for the Ghana Trades Union Congress in the 1960s told me that she had tried to recruit market women’s groups. They were offered membership in the commercial workers’ union, dominated by shop assistants and led by men. They told her that rather than follow a male leader they preferred to join the Ghana Assembly of Women, dominated by church women’s groups”



(Clark 1997, 186).

Clearly, gender dynamics played a big role in the women's decisions (see also Clark 2010) and internal discussion about how to accommodate informal workers, many of whom are women, continued. In 1996 GTUC adopted a resolution to formalize their efforts, seeing that labour casualization was only increasing the number of workers active in the informal economy. In order to attract informal workers, GTUC opted for a dual strategy. On the one hand they continue to encourage workers to form unions or associations and provide assistance to people who express willingness to do so. On the other hand GTUC now also explicitly advocates collaborating with already existing informal workers' organisations and enlisting these under a national umbrella organisation. Through the creation of the overarching Union for Informal Workers' Associations (UNIWA), GTUC is attempting to integrate the championing of informal workers' rights and agenda into the trade union federation.

Established in 2013 and officially founded in 2015, UNIWA has been very vocal and regularly figures prominently in the Ghanaian newspapers.<sup>8</sup> GTUC's organizing efforts include regularly providing trainings for leaders of UNIWA's member associations, for example on union principles, democratic leadership styles, organizing tactics and gender awareness. Most of these trainings are sponsored by international donors or trade unions from the Global North, aiming to sensitize informal workers to the wider political dynamics of which they form an important part. Whether the content of the trainings resonates with the situation on the ground, is however a different matter. As stated earlier, many informal workers' associations do not (aim to) function democratically and leaders frequently voiced their struggle to adhere to the ideals expressed in the trainings during their day to day activities.<sup>9</sup>

Yet apart from 'organisational styles', additional problems have to be reckoned with. Trade unions' interests in organizing in the informal economy are intimately linked to their active search for more dues paying members. Many – but certainly not all – informal workers live hand-to-mouth. This means that they often lack the ability and willingness to pay membership dues. Their willingness is linked to the fact that many informal associations and organisations that (aim to) cover aspects of social security and welfare, such as churches and informal saving groups, already exist (Schindler 2010). In a sense, unions thus compete with the informal structures in which informal workers are already embedded – and indebted to pay dues. Using trade union money to pay for organizing in the informal sector in order to convince informal workers of

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<sup>8</sup> See also this special report on the informal economy in which they are explicitly mentioned <https://www.equaltimes.org/recommendation-204-ending> (last accessed 29-04-2017)

<sup>9</sup> During one training on leadership style, a lady expressed her concern that democracy limits her power over her members and thus leads to fragmentation. Her solution was to mix two of the presented leadership styles: 'I blend the two: democracy and autocracy'.

the additional benefits of becoming a member is a possibility, but is not strongly supported within GTUC. Union officials told me that many dues paying members do not wish to see their fees used for this and argue that informal workers have to pay their own fees if they wish to join. Waiving fees (temporarily), as was done for UNIWA, is another possibility, but also one that is not sustainable in the long run. This, especially when considering that the need for dues paying members is among the prominent reasons why GTUC started organizing in the informal economy in the first place. A third possibility then becomes the use of external funding.

In the case of GTUC, this external funding is being provided by trade unions from the Global North with whom they are linked through their affiliation to ITUC, the International Trade Union Confederation. Examples are the Dutch trade union FNV and the Danish trade unions LO and FTF (LO-FTF). Several German foundations such as the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and Rosa Luxemburg Foundation also frequently contribute(d), as does DANIDA, Denmark's development cooperation agency. Transnational organisations such as WIEGO, Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing, and Streetnet International also form part of the partners that GTUC links with when it comes to organizing events and mobilizing informal workers, without incurring substantial costs themselves. But, as I mention later on in this paper, working with donor funding is not a bed of roses; it creates additional challenges of accountability, representation and unity (Lindell 2009, 2010a, b, c).

### **Informal workers and collective action**

According to Lindell, informal workers were long thought of by governments and economic institutions as having no, or only limited agency (2010a, b, c). This misconception has however been refuted by scholarly work that shows that within the turmoil of capitalism, informal workers 'develop their own leverage in the form of enterprise associations, ethnoreligious networks, political connections, and even alliances with labour unions to push their own agenda, with varied implications for governance outcomes' (Meagher and Lindell 2013: 69, cf. Lindell 2010a, 2010c, Lyon 2003, Awuah 1997). The assumption that informal workers have not organized because they are not organized according to trade union principles, is thus problematic and unfounded. Today, organizing in the informal sector is an important topic, not in the least because of the seemingly ever-growing number of workers active in the informal economy and informal workers' prominent place in plans to reduce poverty and (gender) inequalities globally (Chen 2012).

In democracies, collectivities have more voice than individuals do. This is why collective action is considered to be the most beneficial way to create political leverage (Lindell 2010a, Lindell and Utas 2012, Magure 2015). But collective action is not solely instigated or generated by formalized organisations. We need to look for additional ways that informal workers have organized themselves. Bayat, for example, argues that informal workers sustain 'passive



networks' which they can "switch on" when their subsistence is being threatened (1997). This renders *ad hoc* collective action possible, without placing organisational burdens on (groups of) individuals. An example of these kind of 'politics of informal people' is 'quiet encroachment': a non-oppositional way of claiming one's space and one's share of the city, for example by continuing to sell one's goods in an area where this is not (or no longer) allowed (Bayat 1997, 2000). Bayat contends that this tactic is often used in societies where 'traditional institutions serve as an alternative to civic associations and social movements' (1997, 68). In this paper, the case of Makola market and its traders provides an empirical example to illustrate this point.

In his working paper '*On the informal economy: the political history of an ethnographic concept*', Hart elaborates on the concept he coined and emphasizes that 'we need to know how formal bureaucracy works in practice and, even more important, what social forms have emerged to organize the informal economy' (2009). It is on this note that I want to take the reader to Makola market and to introduce the social movements and organisational structures that emerged there.

## Methodology

This paper is based on information that I gathered during ethnographic fieldwork in Accra, Ghana, from September to November 2016. The fieldwork was conducted in the context of the INCLUDE research project 'Increasing Political Leverage of Informal and Formal workers' Organisations for Inclusive Development: The cases of Ghana and Benin'. The research consortium consisted of several stakeholders including researchers from four different research institutes and universities from four different countries (Belgium, Benin, Ghana and the Netherlands), representatives from trade unions of Ghana, Benin and the Netherlands and informal workers' organisation representatives of Streetnet International and UNIWA among others.

The bulk of the data I collected consists of field notes made during participant observation at the 31<sup>st</sup> December textile section of Makola market. During these market visits I worked closely with my research assistant, a recently graduated Ghanaian woman. Most of the interactions with the traders, both the informal chats and interviews, were in English but sometimes in *Twi*. We would arrive at the market around 8.00 am, when most traders had opened up shop, and stay until 2.00 pm when traders would eat lunch, take a nap and, around 4.00 pm, start closing up shop. There were three reasons why some traders were unwilling to speak to us. First, the economic situation meant that many were not interested in spending their time chatting to someone who was not going to buy their goods. Second, they seemed wary of foreigners wanting to know how their business was doing. They also often mentioned that many people, including 'other *obruni*' (whites), had come to hear about their challenges, but they never heard from them again, or benefitted in any way. Third, my research took place during an election which meant that questions regarding challenges, organizing

and organisational allegiances were highly politicized. Although the traders' suspicions never completely vanished, some did seem to get used to having us around and opened up more during the last weeks of the fieldwork period. Before commencing the research I requested permission from both Makola's market queen and the textile traders' commodity queen.

In total, I spoke to approximately 40 cloth sellers. Half of these chats were brief informal exchanges on how their business was going, whether they were members of an organisation, which challenges they faced and how they would like these to be addressed. Approximately 25 traders allowed us to sit with them for a prolonged period of time and participated in semi-structured interviews that lasted between 1 and 2 hours. During the interviews I brought forward topics that I wanted to discuss, but conversation flowed freely and the interlocutors' interests guided the talk. There was no fixed order in the way I addressed the topics and each interview went differently. We also made clear beforehand that if customers would show up, they could be assisted – which many of our interlocutors took to heart. All traders agreed to let me take notes during the interviews, and some even checked to see whether I wrote down certain details of their stories correctly. No audio recordings were made due to the acoustics in the market and out of respect for the politically sensitive nature of the conversations. Whenever I was in the market, I made a point of passing by those with whom I had already spoken, to greet them. This courtesy appeared to be greatly appreciated and traders often made time for additional conversations on a wide range of topics. Some traders however remained suspicious of our presence, fearing that we were verifying their story with other traders or double-checking because we did not believe what they had told us. I tried as much as possible to address these concerns, but I recognize that I have not been fully able to do so which meant that some traders were not interested in interacting with me.

In addition, I interviewed officials with Ghana's two trade union centres: GFL (Ghana Federation of Labour) and GTUC, and attended meetings. I also interviewed international donors active in the informal sector and visited seminars and workshops organized for market women and informal workers. I also visited a meeting of the Greater Accra Market Association (GAMA), where the market queens and their assistants of all 70-something markets in Greater Accra Region come together. Due to the elections, government officials were often busy campaigning and hesitant to discuss or comment on current matters. In total I interviewed 37 government officials, municipality representatives, NGO-staff members, market leaders and union officials. These interviews were semi-structured and took place in the offices of the respective interlocutors. After receiving permission, some of these interviews were audio recorded.

Being a white, Dutch, unmarried, young woman meant that many traders anticipated that I was working for an NGO or looking for suitable people to enrol in a (profitable) programme, for example for the trade union. I was also often asked about my personal political preferences, because my fieldwork coincided with the election campaigns. By reading the daily newspapers I

continuously attempted to transform these ‘interrogations’ into more informal chats and reflections on Ghana’s political landscape. This was difficult at times, but it also generated helpful insights. All participants in this research were aware of the fact that I was conducting research and what the aim and topic of my research were. If needed, I showed a letter of endorsement from my institution, confirming my position as a researcher and the topic of my interest.

## **Makola market**

Ghana, having figured prominently in the Black Atlantic, has a long history of transatlantic and (inter)national trade (Gilroy 1999, Robertson 1983, Clark 2010). Although Ghana’s biggest market is located in Kumasi in the centre of the country, much of the trade also took place along the coast. This is where we find one of Ghana’s best-known markets: Makola. Located in Accra, Ghana’s capital, it is referred to in the literature as ‘the queen of Accra Markets’ (Robertson 1983, 469). Hundreds of thousands of shops, countless shoppers and thousands of informal workers can be found here every day. In a way, Makola exemplifies the informal economy; harbouring immensely diverse goods, clientele and activities.

During my first visit I was struck by the noise, generated not just by the people present, but also by the cars and busses passing on the nearby road. I was overwhelmed by the chaotic ambiance and the utter explosion of smells, colours and produce; completely lost in this economic focal point. Yet, after several visits, I began to realize that there is more order in this chaos than there seems to be at first glance. At the outer rims of Makola, before entering one of the main gates, ambulant traders walk around while carrying their goods on their heads. Just in front of the gate, a whole square is occupied by the same traders every day: the lady selling pig feet always sits next to the lady who sells fish and the two ladies who sell vegetables and tomatoes. They stick to the same order of shops even though no permanent structures oblige them to do so. This is different inside the market, where small buildings and containers form a maze of roads, fully decorated with everything that is on sale.

When Makola was built, in 1924, many people in Accra relied on it to buy their daily food (Grant and Yankson 2002, Robertson 1983). Most of the vendors and traders were (and are) women, ‘as is often common in West African outdoor markets’ (Jamison 2003, 10, Clark 2010). Initially, Makola market was intended to be a wholesale market, located just outside of town with ample space to park. However, Ghana’s urbanization caught up with (what was mainly colonial) city planning and slowly engulfed Makola and its surrounding areas (Grant and Yankson 2002). When the Ghanaian economy stagnated in the 1970s, the government looked for a scapegoat and blamed the market women for everything that was going wrong: ‘the market women, because of their *visible* role, were forced to bear the brunt of the public displeasure provoked by shortages in goods, *invisible* inflation, decline in terms of trade, corruption and incompetence’ (Robertson 1983, 469, emphasis in original, Britwum 2013, Clark

2010). This eventually led to Makola's destruction in 1979, as a desperate attempt by the government to "improve" the Ghanaian economy (Grant and Yankson 2002, Robertson 1983, Clark 2010).

After the destruction market women rebuilt as much as they could, but Makola 2 was again destroyed in 1981 (Robertson 1983). Several market leaders I spoke to described this period with tears in their eyes, narrating the fear they felt and the hardships their mothers had had to endure. Luckily, after realizing that the destructions hadn't improved the economy, the government decided to reconstruct Makola (Grant and Yankson 2002). Today, 'Makola as a marketplace consists of four officially recognized parts (31<sup>st</sup> December Market, Annex II Market, Tema Station Annex and Kwasea Guasu) and many more loosely associated subsections' (Thiel 2015, 11). The 31<sup>st</sup> December market, where I conducted most of my fieldwork, was officially opened by President Rawlings on the 31<sup>st</sup> of December in 1986. Nowadays, under the auspices of Chinese developers, a big shopping mall is being constructed right next to it. This is part of a broader development because, as the municipal authorities explained to me, Ghana's markets 'need to be more modern so they fulfil the needs of our times'. According to the Accra Metropolitan Assembly (AMA), Makola is in urgent need of 'modernisation' and 'renovation' (see also Hobden 2015 on the increase of modern shopping malls in Ghana).

Like most markets in Ghana, Makola is traditionally ruled by a powerful market queen (Asomani-Boateng 2016, Britwum 2013, Clark 1997, 2010). She settles disputes and interacts with the municipality, supposedly always keeping the interests of the market and its vendors at heart. Makola's market queen is also a key figure when it comes to engagements with AMA concerning the potential modernisation of the market. In the next section I describe market queens and their activities in more depth.

## **Market queens**

Ghanaian markets, although seemingly chaotic when visited for the first time, are in practice highly organized. For starters, all traders selling in a market are members of the commodity association of the commodity that they sell (Clark 1997, 2010, Britwum 2013, Fallon 2003). If a trader sells onions, they become a member of the onion association, if they sell textiles they become a member of the textile association etc. And 'although membership in the association is voluntary, in reality one can hardly legitimize his or her place in the market without belonging to an association' (Asomani-Boateng 2016, 186). All of the traders with whom I spoke, were members of a commodity association. They referred to this membership as 'automatic'.

Each of these commodity associations is headed by a 'commodity queen' (Asomani-Boateng 2016, Clark 2010). So there is an onion queen, a textile queen etc. 'To be selected as a commodity queen, one has to command respect from the group; be humble, diligent, and courageous; have foresight and intelligence; and command loyalty' from the members of the association

(Asomani-Boateng 2016, 186). The commodity queens solve disputes that occur between members of the association and they are involved in price setting and bargaining when it comes to tariffs: members of the association can be both wholesalers and retailers. In the case of the textile traders in Makola's 31<sup>st</sup> December market, wholesalers tend to sell materials to their fellow textile traders as well as engaging in retailing with customers. This has also been extensively documented for the tomato queens who are involved in organizing the ways in which the freshly harvested tomatoes reach the market areas (see Britwum 2013, Lyon 2003 and Clark 2010 among others). Commodity queens also allocate selling spaces to their members, organize market-clean ups when they see fit and, sometimes, assist in revenue collection (Asomani-Boateng 2016, Clark 1997).

Commodity association members pay regular contributions to the association which are used to assist each other in times of sickness or in case one of the members passes away: extra contributions are then collected which are used to pay for the funeral, which is an important cultural event (Clark 1997, Clark 2010). Commodity queens are expected to attend the funerals of their members to signify the importance of the group. Some commodity associations also function as informal credit schemes, referred to as *susu*, by having members contribute a small amount every week or month and distributing this to one selected member (Schindler 2010, Asomani-Boateng 2016). By remaining in the *susu* scheme, debts are automatically paid off over time. Also, traders hardly default on these payments to the association because of the social pressure and importance to maintain a position of credibility vis-à-vis their competition and clients in the market (Schindler 2010). The commodity associations thus 'provide economic and social benefits for their members' (Awuah 1997, 407, Clark 2010). Clark refers to them as 'cohesive collegial sets' which is interesting because apart from being colleagues, traders are also each other's competition (2010). The latter partly explains why, when a commodity queen is chosen by the members of her association, her ability to settle disputes is the most important characteristic that they look for (Clark 1997).

The queens of all commodity associations are, supposedly, in regular contact with each other and together they choose an overall market queen from their midst, with the help of a council of market elders (Clark 1997, 2010). This market queen rules over the overall market, but has no 'jurisdiction' within a particular commodity association other than her own. Traditionally, the market queen often hails from the larger and more important commodity associations, such as the ones selling yam, tomatoes or textile (Clark 1997, Greenstreet 1972). This organisational form can be traced back to the beginning of this century and market queens' positions can be likened to that of chiefs (Clark 1997, Clark 2010, Britwum 2013). Queens 'are elected by their elders for life, and can be destooled by them in case of bad conduct' (Clark 1997, 184). But, unlike chiefs, market queens rule only over market traders, who are mostly women. Their following is thus highly gendered and defined 'by occupation rather than residence or citizenship, as in community leadership, or kinship as in lineage leadership' (Clark 1997, 184). Also, although market queens rule over the

market, they do not rule over the land that the market is on, nor are they officially recognized in chieftaincy hierarchies or government bureaucracy (Clark 1997, Britwum 2013, Thiel 2015, 60).

Market traders look for specific qualities in their market queen. First of all she has to have a good track record of functioning as a commodity queen in her own association. She also has to be wealthy: a queen needs to be financially able to regularly attend – expensive – ceremonial gatherings such as funerals and meetings, which means that she will have less time to work as a trader (Clark 1997, Lyon 2003). The market queen is also supposed to have a non-confrontational character and be able to smoothen out conflicts swiftly, or at least before they escalate (Clark 1997). This is in everybody's interest, because traders often work side by side on a daily basis for many decades. Like the commodity queens, the market queen is able to give punishments and fines, which reinforces her authority over market traders. Traders hardly oppose the market queen, not only because she has the power to decide who can and who cannot trade in the market, but also because they rely on her support in case they find themselves in a conflict in the future. Even when they disagree with the queen's judgement, 'the fear of complete ostracism encourages member traders to accept' her ruling (Clark 1997, 195).

Succession of market queens does not necessarily take place in hereditary fashion: the market's council of elders appoint the successor whom they deem to be most suitable (Clark 1997). As Makola's market queen put it: 'we don't vote. We appoint and approve'. It does however often happen that a market queen uses her reign to prepare her daughter for the position, which makes them a strong candidate in the eyes of the council of elders and many market traders.

In 'her' market, the market queen is the leader of the general traders association, which is present in every market in Ghana. In the case of Makola market, this association is called the Makola Market Traders Association (MMTA). It consists of representatives of several commodity associations and they support the queen in executing her tasks. Because of the large number of markets in Ghana, the market queens of all markets have also organized themselves per administrative region. Ghana has ten regions and each hosts a regional chapter of the market queens' associations. In the case of Makola market this is the Greater Accra Market Association (GAMA). The regional associations of all ten regions together form the national chapter of the market queen's network.

The above described archetypal functioning of market queens developed over centuries and has facilitated national, international and transnational trade relations throughout history and the present. However, considering it as the 'traditional' structure of market governance in Ghana, should not lead to assumptions about the ways in which it functioned or will function in the near future: the structure is anything but static (Clark 1997, 2010 Asomani-Boateng 2016). Markets exist in society and therefore shape and are shaped by developments in society at large. This becomes evident when looking at one of the most important roles that a market queen has: she not only represents the



market within the structure of market governance, she is also the market's representative to the outside world. Ghana's tumultuous independence struggle, later followed by democratization and the current partisan political system, severely influence both what it means and what it takes to be(come) a market queen (Clark 2010).

In the 1950s and 1960s 'women participated in the anti-colonial struggle and boycotted policies, such as taxation, implemented by the colonial government' (Fallon 2003, 529). They assisted Kwame Nkrumah's movement financially but they also contributed organisational power and encouraged others to 'rally behind the leaders of the independence struggle' (Drah 2014, 15). Of all the 'other social, religious and occupational women's groups, the market women were most influential' (Drah 2014, 15). The market traders, personified by the market queens, were at the forefront of these actions because they were well organized and connected to the wider (urban) governance system and national authorities. The queens' strong personalities, powerful economic positions and effective organizing both within and outside of the markets, contributed greatly to the eventual victory of independence (Fallon 2003, cf. Drah 2014). This glorious position however radically changed once Ghana's economy began to suffer.

At the end of the 1970s and early 1980s, market women came to be 'targeted as enemies of the state', being held accountable for inflation and steep price rises (Fallon 2003, 530, Clark 2010). Market queens came to be seen as corrupt, representing the many market traders who were 'stealing' money from the population by selling commodities at expensive prices. The destruction of markets that subsequently took place throughout the country symbolized the public's feelings of discontent (Clark 1997, Robertson 1983, Clark 2010, Fallon 2003). Rawlings, who was in power at the time, however quickly realized that he needed to maintain a close relationship with the market women in order to prevent them from turning against him, like they had with the colonial rulers. He started a women's organisation in 1982: the 31<sup>st</sup> December Women's Movement. 'The group's ostensible purpose was to encourage women to become involved economically, socially, and politically in the state; however, it acted as an apparatus to mobilize women under' his political party (Fallon 2003, 530). In 1985, Nana Konadu, Rawlings' wife, became the movement's president (Fallon 2003, Thiel 2015, 13). Makola market's 31<sup>st</sup> December area is named after this movement and is therefore intimately associated with Rawlings' political party, the National Democratic Congress (NDC). This serves Makola's traders well during the times that this party is in power, but it is to their detriment when another political party is in office.

Since the democratic transition in 1992, the two largest political parties (NDC and New Patriot Party) have alternated rule, hence Ghana's political system has become characterized by partisan allegiances (Bob-Milliar 2012, Crawford 2009, Paller 2014). Through their wide network of connections to local and national government agencies, the market queens have become fully implicated in this. By associating themselves with one political party, queens are able to tap

into a pool of (political and) financial resources, which they use to obtain infrastructural improvements in their markets, increase the visibility and improve the image of market women in society. Makola's queen, for example, aligned herself with the – now former– NDC government and managed to secure a position within the municipal authority: the Accra Metropolitan Assembly (AMA).<sup>10</sup> By having a seat at the table, she frequently used the political stage to argue for a stronger position of market women. She also joined forces with the ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection by assisting in the organisation of the first 'National Market Women Conference' on October 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> 2016. This conference was aimed at 'empowering market women for economic prosperity' and the (then) first lady was the keynote speaker.<sup>11</sup>

Using her political network, Makola's market queen (among other queens) has become widely known in Ghanaian society, in which informal institutions and personal rule – especially in the urban areas – are very common (Paller 2014). Yet this should not be taken to mean that market queens rule unchallenged or have a monopoly on organizing in the market, as the next section will make clear.

### **The New Makola Market Traders Union**

One market houses many different traders. Although they are all members of commodity association, many of them are also aligned to a wide range of other (informal) organisations and movements – some of them political.<sup>12</sup> Many textile traders told me about their church groups, *susu* circle or the groups of women from their neighbourhood or villages of origin, whom they regularly meet up with. "We are just by ourselves, no protection", one cloth seller told me, so she joined multiple groups and makes use of the complementary services they offer. Another lady explained that she had tried to form an association, but it had failed: 'we are all far and busy with our own stall, there was no time to leave our stores to go for meetings so it failed'. Being too busy with one's business was often mentioned as a reason for not joining additional organisations apart from the commodity association. The Constitution of the Republic of Ghana safeguards the women's rights to join organisations: 'all persons shall have the right to (...) freedom of association, which shall include freedom to form or join trade unions or other associations, national or

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<sup>10</sup> NDC lost the elections that were held on December 7<sup>th</sup> 2016.

<sup>11</sup> <http://globalnews60.com/2016/10/maiden-national-market-women-conference-ends-in-high-hopes/> (last accessed 29-04-2017)

<sup>12</sup> Partisan politics play a big role in everyday life in Ghana and also in the emergence of different organisations and social movements that (cl)aim to represent market traders. Discussing the in-depth intricacies of this aspect of social reality goes beyond the scope of this paper. I do refer to the partisan system in cases where political allegiances appear to (have) play(ed) a decisive role.

international, for the protection of their interest'.<sup>13</sup> It is this latter right that has enabled the activities of one textile trader in particular: she started a trade union in Makola market.

Her shop is rather small and when I came to talk to her I was impressed by the amount of fierceness that a slender, now elderly lady is able to radiate when speaking on issues that market traders face. Her health no longer allows her to be present in the market every day, but she speaks passionately of having been a textile trader since she was 'old enough to walk'. Her mother had also been a textile trader and she inherited her shop from her. She also vividly remembers the impact of the market destructions of the late 1970s and early 1980s, as she had never seen her mother so upset. According to her, this is partly why she has always been very aware of the struggles of (textile) traders and the hardships that they face. Based on her mother's past experiences, she felt that self-organisation was the only way to defend themselves against 'many market oppressors'. In 1996 she starts to speak to her fellow traders on issues of shared concern ranging from (gaining) access to a proper toilet to fixing a leaking roof. She also discusses the responsibilities of the municipal authorities (AMA) when it comes to maintenance of the market structures: all traders pay daily and yearly fees to AMA but the women are not convinced that their money is being used properly. The dilapidated state of the market infrastructure underlines their point.

After the elections in 2000, the NDC lost power and the market queens' position vis-a-vis the new NPP government became problematic: knowing that she was not 'on their side', the NPP government was reluctant to work with her. In an attempt to obtain resources to improve their working conditions, the textile trader doubled her efforts to organize her colleagues and she found a partner in GTUC. Having established contacts with them since 1999, the textile trader resembled an 'entry point' for GTUC to come into the market. Also, because her brother had become a regional minister for Greater Accra Region in the new NPP government, she had strong linkages to power. Some textile traders in Makola even say that she was officially installed as market queen because she became the government's official spokesperson for Makola's 31<sup>st</sup> December market. Makola's market queen fiercely disputes this and insists that she did not step down: to be a market queen is a lifelong position (see also Thiel 2015, 16).

Related to this dispute is however the story that the textile trader attempted to change the name of the market: by removing 'December' she hoped that it would be less closely associated with the 31<sup>st</sup> December Women's Movement, which is linked to the NDC – the opposition party at the time. Regardless of whether these stories are true, it is certainly the case that her brother's position as a minister gave her (access to) a lot of power.

Another example of this is the way in which she was able to facilitate the

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<sup>13</sup> Available here:

<http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/republic/constitution.php?id=Gconst5.html> (last accessed 29-04-2017)

registration process of the trade union that she founded with the help of GTUC in 2002 or 2003: the New Makola Market Traders Union (NMMTU) (cf. Thiel 2015, 15). Needless to say, this name is very similar to that of the queens' organisation: Makola Market Traders Association (MMTA). The adjective 'new' hence immediately created animosity, prompting the market queen to state that there was 'nothing new' about the NMMTU and that those whom it claimed to represent, were already being represented by her at all organisational levels. Yet, much to the dismay of the market queen, the NMMTU, through GTUC, subsequently had access to connections and resources which allowed them to be vocal and offer members access to trainings and workshops. When GTUC founded UNIWA, the Union for Informal Workers Associations, NMMTU was one of its founding members and they and their members are frequently offered trainings as well as mentioned in international publications.<sup>14</sup>

With the increasing global interests in organizing in the informal economy, the NMMTU became exposed to international organisations as well, who made good use of their (albeit limited) network on the ground. Streetnet International, an organisation defending the rights of street vendors, enlisted NMMTU's founder to become the President of the Streetnet Ghana Chapter, despite the fact that she had never been a street vendor: she had always had her shop in Makola. WIEGO, Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing, also linked up with them and several of NMMTU's members were subsequently able to participate in international meetings overseas, greatly boosting their status and visibility on the international stage. On the ground in Makola however, this hardly translated into more influence due to the conflict with Makola's market queen. When asked about the NMMTU leader, one commodity queen said: 'she is nobody'. 'All she does is do things with the NGO's and so on'. She continued by arguing that NMMTU is only active internationally and outside of the market, but that they can't do anything inside the market because they are not part of the queen's structure. This conflict between the NMMTU leader and the market queens, fuels the competition between the organisations they represent.

## Competition

The labour movement, represented by the New Makola Market Traders Union (NMMTU) and the market queens' network, represented by the Makola Market Traders Association (MMTA), ultimately claim and aim to represent and defend the interests of the same group of informal workers, active in the same locality. Yet, they are often at odds and do not collaborate. How did this competition come about and what are its consequences?

The NMMTU claims to be democratically organized and prides itself on not being politically linked. Both of these claims can however be contested, as Makola's market queen likes to point out. Although NMMTU aims to function

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<sup>14</sup> See for example <https://www.equaltimes.org/recommendation-204-ending>

democratically and according to trade union principles, its founding member is firmly leading the organisation in practice (see also Thiel 2015). Meetings do not appear to take place regularly and traders (both members and non-members) in the market are not aware of the union's activities: 'they don't tell us'. Also, NMMTU's political neutrality can be questioned based on the fact that its founding member is linked to the now ruling NPP government. This connection might be less explicit than the connection between NDC and Makola's current market queen, but it exists nonetheless. Market queens' political ties traditionally form an important part of the network they use to obtain resources and protect 'their' market and its traders (Clark 2010). Also, the queens are not organized democratically and do not claim to be: once elected and appointed as a market queen, they occupy this position for life.

These two organisational differences explain why international organisations interested in organizing in the informal economy tend to collaborate with NMMTU and not with MMTA. They do not recognize the market queens as a potential partner because of their organisational structure. Yet, the majority of traders in Makola's 31<sup>st</sup> December market are very hesitant to join or associate themselves with the union precisely because of the existing conflict between the two organisations. 'I have no interest in the union. I don't want problems', several traders told me.<sup>15</sup> Other traders mentioned that the commodity associations, which are part of the market queens' structure, already offer them what they need and that they did not wish to pay another membership fee to join yet another group. This sentiment is often reiterated because it is widely known that the union has connections with GTUC and international (donor) organisations: they are 'supposed to assist us, not take our money', one trader stated. Some union members put forward that income is needed in order for the union to become successful, but the market women are not impressed by this: 'don't let somebody tell you today is no good, [but] tomorrow', an older lady said. 'If you want to do me good, do me good now'.

Most of NMMTU's activities consist of trainings and workshops facilitated by GTUC, often paid for with donor assistance. Only a limited number of people can attend these trainings and most of the times, the leaders go themselves. 'It's always the same people' who participate and benefit, several cloth sellers said. Others commented by saying 'the money is only on one side' – meaning, with the leaders. Most of the people I spoke to thus considered the union as an income generating activity for its leaders, rather than an organisation they could join to improve their working conditions. The influence of NMMTU in the market itself, is thus negligible: it mostly exists in name and has not been very successful in expanding its membership. Tsikata argues that this has been the case for many other women's movements in Ghana as well (2009). She refers to

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<sup>15</sup> This statement has a double meaning: either they did not want to become involved in the conflict between the NMMTU leader and the market queen, or they did not want to get into trouble because of their presumed political allegiance (NMMTU being associated with NPP, MMTA with NDC). Because my research took place during election time, partisan politics figured prominently in traders' deliberations and explanations.

this as the ‘NGOization’ of organisation:

*NGOization refers not to the existence of NGOs per se, but more to the growing dominance of a particular organisational form and politics characterized by the lack of a mass base, connection and accountability; donor dependence, the substitution of NGOs for civil society and mass movements; the prioritization of a professional technocratic approach over politics because NGOs cannot be overtly political or partisan; and a short-term project-based approach (...)* (Tsikata 2009, 186).

Due to its organisational structure, NMMTU is preferred as a partner by GTUC and international donors. At the same time, NMMTU does not nearly have as many members or as much influence on the ground as the market queens do. The queens’ organisational structure functions more like what Bayat has described as the ‘passive network’ – albeit more structurally organized and culturally embedded – reaching out to many of the traders present in the market (1997, 2000). But not all. Indeed, one could argue that democratic movements are more inclusive than movements that appoint leaders for life. However, both types of organizing create so-called ‘winners’ and ‘losers’: those who benefit and those who do not, or less so. My point here is that even though market queens are not often considered as possible partners by trade unions and international organisations, attempts to bypass their networks have not yielded much success so far. In fact, organizing in the market turns out to be extremely difficult without the queen’s support: traders are hesitant to involve themselves with the union and the union’s (internal) functioning in practice is hampered by the conflict with the market queen.

If they want to work in the market, ‘they are forced to be close to us’, Makola’s market queen said. According to her, the GTUC and the international organisations that collaborate with NMMTU have been ‘deceived’ by the NMMTU leadership in thinking that they represent the market traders. NMMTU leaders of course retaliate by stating that they were chosen to represent their members, whereas the market queen is not. The differences in organisational form, political ties and (international) access to resources has fuelled competition and diminished the possibilities for collective action on a market-wide scale.

Fortunately, most of the actors involved have started to realize this. GTUC and UNIWA are undertaking new attempts to reconcile with Makola’s market queen and WIEGO is also increasingly trying to work on both sides of the divide, inviting both NMMTU and MMTA leadership and members to their programs. Although not (yet) always successful, this appears to be the only way to prevent boycotts and low turn-outs. Clearly, competition is less beneficial than collaboration – for all involved.

In this paper, I argue that despite having reservations on the organisational structures and political functioning of the market queens, including them in



attempts to organize in the market is beneficial to inclusive collective action. A recent study for example underlines the potential of including market queens' networks when it comes to organic solid waste management. In it, Asomani-Boateng criticizes the fact that the market queens' network has often been misused, instead of collaborated with for improvements: 'Politicians are quick to use these associations as their support base to canvass for votes and financial donations during political elections, but have failed to exploit their immense potential to solve the myriad of problems facing cities in Ghana' (2016, 191). Drah came to a similar conclusion in her work on queen mothers, explicitly addressing academics and the ways in which we produce knowledge: 'unfortunately, women's struggles and the academic frameworks that explain these struggles are skewed towards formal national politics, to the neglect of the traditional political institutions' (2014, 19). This is why this article has attempted to provide an empirical illustration of the need to collaborate with organisational structures on the ground when it comes to organizing for the benefit of market traders in particular, and informal workers in general. Bypassing existing structures leads to conflict and fragmentation.

## Conclusions

In this paper I have presented an empirical case that explicates the intricacies of attempts to organize informal workers. I started by discussing the informal economy, emphasizing that most informal workers suffer from decent work deficits, as defined by the ILO. Globally, trade unions have become increasingly involved in combating these deficits, aiming to orchestrate collective action. But, as the case of Makola market shows, this is not without its problems. Not only are informal workers not – as is often assumed – unorganized, they are organized in ways that are not recognized as an organisation or a type of social movement. The example of the market queens signifies one way in which informal market traders have succeeded in organizing and regulating themselves and their work environments.

The market queens' powerful networks function in Ghana's partisan political environment by engaging in alliances with political parties. The labour movement functions in a different way: they aim not to engage in partisan politics and they strive to organize democratically. These ideological differences on how to organize have created a tense situation in Makola market, fuelling competition and fragmentation in an already inherently competitive and fragmented market environment. The market queens are powerful on the ground but are not recognized sufficiently by the union; whereas the union is having difficulties to expand its membership on the ground because it is not recognized by the market queens. This ongoing conflict hampers the union's functioning and the competition has further complicated attempts to come to collective action.

By presenting Makola market as a case study, this paper provides empirical evidence that underlines the importance of moving 'beyond the core' when it

comes to researching social movements and working in the field. Taking into account culturally embedded and locally emerged institutions and organisations demonstrates the problems that can arise when approaching 'social movements' by using a blueprint of what they should look like and how they should function. Instead, by keeping an open mind and immersing oneself in the situation, the existing potential of collaborations across difference comes into view. This perhaps makes moving 'beyond the core' analytically challenging, but it enriches our understanding of our shared and diverse world. After all, 'nobody can jump from outside'.

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